Gevaudan, 1770

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Gevaudan, 1770

by orphan_account, whiskeyandspite

Summary

Here, instead it was life. He eats what he has killed, until his nose is deep in the hollow he's made in the man's belly and his own is filled with what he has taken - it's a strange balance. The balance that all life has - taking, receiving. He will not be driven from here, he thinks, as he licks vital, living blood off his muzzle. Here was his, and what did not heed his marks, what did not learn - he would eat.

He would eat well.

Men are relentless until they learn to be hopeless.

A beast terrorizes the province of Gevaudan. And a strange hunter arrives from the north bearing wolf pelts and secrets.

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There is never just one lifetime, not for people who are meant to meet. In Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter's case, they shared five. Four which they could not share fully, and one which they did. This is their third.

Notes

This is the third in a 5-part AU series depicting the lifetimes Hannibal and Will had shared but never fully lived through, and one that they're still working on (canon). We will post every Sunday for the next six weeks.

This has been an ongoing project for a few months and we are very proud of it. Some of the lifetimes connect more than others, there are mentions and clues connecting to previous 'lives' or past ones and they do flow into one another, as slowly but surely they get closer and closer to this lifetime they share now.

They will be rated per story, some ranging to explicit for violence, while others for sex. We're just gonna assume that language isn't a factor ;)

He still understands what they're saying, when he crouches and waits for them to come into his reach. They sit at streams and wash their clothes, bringing their warm human smells into the green of his territory. He's spent a long time searching for a place to call his own - wandering, as time stretched on in long months and years. Time felt longer, now that his heart beat faster. It has only been three years since his bite, it has only been that long since the change, but it feels like a whole lifetime.

Before that, existence is confused. It seems dreary and fast, as if years had flown out of him while he stood still and accomplished nothing, blind and deaf. He'd always had an excellent sense of smell, but it was nothing compared to this. The scents come alive for him, show him images of the past and teach him identities - he finds, since his change, he never forgets a smell.

In the earliest days, he had found it easy to change back - he'd found he wanted to, to cling to humanity. But the speed of time, the way things grew dull and silent and invisible to his eyes and nose - he had found that forgetting suited him more each time.

Now he exists between. His sharp, black ears hear the sounds, and his mind remembers what words were, what they meant, but the compulsion that had come with them at one time, the understanding of a human strife or struggle.

The women speak meaningless trivialities, and the scent of soap - rendered rich fat that tingles against the roof of his mouth in a strange way - escalates until it tingles his nose and burns in his lungs. It drowns the stream and hot flesh scents of the women, and threatens to make him sneeze out the attack on his nose.

The women are smart, and when he growls they gather up their skirts and flee, without him needing to reveal himself.

But they send the men, and this intrusion into his territory he will not tolerate - they come with guns and swords, they come assured of their power, their dominion over the wild. They come because nothing has suggested to them that they are no longer the apex of danger in this world. He teaches them differently.

With his teeth, he rends - hot blood tasting rich and of salt against his tongue. With his eyes he pierces, with four legs he outruns. He has powerful jaws and surprisingly sharp claws, and he is faster than they expect, bigger than they expect, and smarter. When they call to co-ordinate, he drops the first man's torn throat from his jaws and their ranks break. He does not chase them - he does not have to, they will find a pack and return.

He has had a territory in the past, owned a patch of fetid, stinking city with no trees, hard stones beneath his feet. The men had not hunted him this way, then. They had blamed the true monsters, men, for what he had taken in the city - but he had been driven out anyway. A hunter had come that knew better than most - that still held to the old ways and superstitions that prevailed outside the city, and though the others had laughed at him, Hannibal had found the hunter too close on his heels and no advantage to fighting for that stinking, filthy place. It smelled of death there.

Here, instead it was life. He eats what he has killed, until his nose is deep in the hollow he's made in the man's belly and his own is filled with what he has taken - it's a strange balance. The balance that all life has - taking, receiving. He will not be driven from here, he thinks, as he licks vital, living blood off his muzzle. Here was his, and what did not heed his marks, what did not learn - he would eat.

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The forests surrounding Gévaudan are thick with pine and dry with it. On a clear night it's easy to see through the trunks of the towering trees, the moonlight casting crosshatch shadows in an intricate carpet on the ground. On warmer nights there are deer, lithe, tiny things picking their way through the underbrush with barely a sound. On colder nights, wolves exchange mourning sighs with their own echo. On nights like these, where the moon is barely more than a curved smirk in the sky, the forest rests.

William has learned to step in such a way as to not disturb the forest floor. Tracks he leaves, but little else. No sound. No brush of coat against the trunks of trees he rests behind as he waits. The night is the best time to hunt, nature's own special hour when prey has learned to sit still and play the game. The meat is always softer, sweeter, when it's not tense and frightened. William slides an arrow from the quiver on his back and adjusts his fingers on the bow. An outdated weapon, perhaps, but a gunshot would frighten away anything in the forest that can hear it. And with the way the trees are growing, far enough apart for a clear shot, an easy run, it would echo to the next province.

He's been here a week, perhaps a day more, taken in by a family too scared to ask questions, far more terrified of the forest than the stranger who enters it every night. On the eve of William's arrival, there had been another death, the sixty-fourth. Another man found gutted and splayed out in the snow, weapons merely a pace away from his outstretched, frozen fingers. The shot hadn't even been fired, the gunpowder grown damp from the snow. They call it a wolf, a wolf of hell that has been brought by the devil to test faith. William knows better.

A beast it is, surely, but the devil did not conjure it. Such things, such evil, only man can imagine. Animals do not kill for sport, it is a human pastime. Animals hunt for food, they do not leave a carcass, sometimes still warm enough to steam in the early morning air, to be found and taken away. Not in the dead of winter when food is so scarce that they would venture close enough to people to hunt at all. No. This was a beast but it was no wild animal. It was coordinated and clever, scheming and cruel. It was a man in all but name.

The deer doesn't see William raise his bow, and he doesn't need it to. It's a young doe, still tentatively exploring her first winter, twitching at every sound, placing her feet carefully around the branches that litter the floor, dusted in snow. William blinks, exhales, and looses the arrow. In the silence the forest has grown used to, the skittering of long legs in a flurry of confusion is startling, loud enough, it would seem, to wake the village behind them. But no

one stirs, no lights come on in windows, no panicked cries. The deer escapes the clearing and takes her fumbling to a safer place.

Perhaps another night, when William is hungry, when he needs to kill, he'll find her again.

He steps away, around the tree and past it, feet careful and silent, bow at his side just skimming the loose needles the deer had stirred up. It lays still, but breathing, the fur bristled in panic and pain as William approaches the wolf and kneels by its side. It's small, but not for age. The ribs showing stark through the beautiful pelt, eyes yellow and following the movement of the man that felled him. William retrieves his knife, one hand gently stroking the animal, feeling the pulse, watching the breath fans out in clouds before it.

The blade is quick, silver marred by the brightness of the blood, and the last cloud of breath dissipates to nothing. And the wolf lies still. William stays, he watches. Then slowly, drawing his jacket over the heel of his hand, he cleans the knife in the snow, pine needles scouring the drying blood away until the knife is clean once more, unmarred, unmarked, and still hungry.

William hefts the creature onto his shoulders, taking the time to adjust to the new balance before setting off to return home. He can sell the pelt. The meat he'll smoke to keep; winter is not kind this year to France, it will be long, the extra food will not be wasted, he is sure, the source not questioned.

Perhaps another night, when the blade hits true and the beast responds in bubbling curses and pleas, William can leave the village for another.

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It's five days later, three long legged carcasses carefully skinned and drained and hung in the snow, left in part as bait - it was a daring creature, brazen and unafraid of men, and in part to prevent waste. There were a host of scavengers who would not shun the parts that would otherwise go unused, and perhaps the scent of a fresh kill, a pile of offal left to offering would arouse curiosity. It's only then when he finds the first sign. The print, left in the soft mud of the riverbank where the creature must have stopped to drink, is larger than the hoofprint the horse leaves near to it.

He already has a fresh, dripping pelt slung over the rump of his horse, ready to stretch and scrape and dry, but tomorrow he will know better where to look. The forests are deep and seem welcoming, but there is also a presence there. He is acutely aware of his intrusion on to the territory, acutely attuned to any sign that he was being watched. The track is old, but it's a better start than the smaller creatures that slink around the edges of the beast's territory.

At the edge of the pines, with soft winter needles brushing along his mare's flank, he senses that there are eyes watching. Nothing leaps for him, however, nothing comes, and the sensation fades in the instant his mount sets her first hoof outside the forest.

The villagers ask him, when he returns early in the morning, about his luck. Though he has not killed the devil that lives here, they are almost as frightened of real wolves, and these animals have grown desperate and bolder in their fear and hunger. It's the wolves - the regular

wolves and not the beast - who take their sheep and cattle. Who prowl the wooded edges of the fields and spread panic that that one might be the terror that has taken so many sons.

"It isn't the beast," Camille tells him, solemn faced and quiet, when he reaches the edge of the farmhold. She walks alongside William's mare, and he drops the reins onto the horse's neck, so she can drop her head down and pull the sweet grass that the girl offers her out of her hands.

Camille had seen the second attack, had seen the beast take her brother and drag him from sight, and it had left its mark on her as surely as if it had sunk its teeth into her flesh instead.

"They will all tell you, Monsieur, that the beast is black," she says, and his mare pulls grass from her hands and chews around her bit, content to walk at the same pace as the girl as they head toward the barn. "But it isn't, not truly. In the sun, it's brown and silver goes through its fur. It is bigger, too. You will see."

"I will," William agrees, thinking of the size of the track he had found. "It's cunning, soeurette, but prideful. That will bring it down, in the end."

She does not need to take his mare's reins to lead her after he swings his leg over the saddle and pulls the pelt and carcass off her back, she simply holds the last of the grass and the mare follows her willingly into the barn and into her care.

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William takes his time to undress, peeling away layers and setting them aside. He'd found, throughout the years, that he had no problem with cold, would even radiate heat if he ever shared his bed. So he crawls under the mess of throws with a sigh and buries his head so the light can't pierce his eyelids and rests, relaxing every muscle one at a time until his mind is drifting.

It's then he hears it. The growl that's almost too low – no, exactly too low – to be heard by human ears. Like a vibration, an echo, a feeling rather than a sound. He knows it's meant for him. knows no one else has heard it. and knows, also that if he doesn't rise to answer it there will be screams to rouse him instead.

Will opens his eyes, jaw setting in a tension he's allowed to not ail him for weeks, and arches his back when he rises, resting under the warm covers on his knees and elbows before straightening and dropping his head back with a sigh.

He dresses lighter, for the day, and forgoes his mare. Taking just his blades and arrows and skirting the edge of the village until he finds the trees.

It's not utterly a beast - though likely it has been a very long time since it was anything more. He has come into its territory, as a threat. It feels him acutely, like the sensation of a bee sting, repeating. At the treeline he finds the first signs of blood, where a shepherd should be minding his flock - the sheep have gone back to grazing, if they were even disturbed by the sudden loss of their minder.

The body lies in a graceless sprawl, lacking continuity. The beast has powerful jaws and frustration enough to have rent his victim, now that it knows that evasion and patience won't work to drive the intruder off. Now it has to kill.

The scent covering William's own gives him chance enough to get close. But then the scent itself attracts the beast's attention, and silver tipped ears precede bright yellow eyes into view from the gloom of the underbrush. If it hadn't moved, wondering why a doe deer should venture so close to the scent of blood, William never would have spotted it. It's brown shadow and shine, and large enough to be of height with the shoulder of his horse, if it were standing fully.

Yellow eyes meet William's for a long moment, and no threat comes from the beast's dripping jaws as it gets its feet beneath it. The lupine features are difficult to read but it understands - it might even respect. Then it lowers its head and shows its teeth, to see if William has reconsidered his enemy.

William regards it with wide eyes. The size of it, the color. Camille wasn't lying when she said it wasn't black. It's a strange kind of roan, as though the red had faded to silver from years of stress and toil, much like human hair would. He doesn't blink, doesn't back down from where he stands, close enough to the edge of the forest to leave it should he choose to. William lets out a low breath and straightens, eyes lowering to regard the beast, a gesture of dominance, not submission. He won't have time to go for his arrows just yet but he can use his knife.

If the beast is what he suspects, the arrows will be useless for anything more than surface damage.

But it doesn't attack, not yet. Just as William hasn't moved to. They're at an impasse, two hunters eye to eye, only a grudging respect for the other keeping them trembling with tension but no movement. The beasts' lips draw back further at William's unwillingness to surrender and step back. William, for his part, doesn't move again.

If respect is what's holding back the beast, William is held back by patience. The killings are not worthy of respect. They're childish in their anger, in their mess and cruelty. William came close, just once, to a beast like this. In a cold, stinking city farther north. He hadn't killed it but he'd come very close. It was one of the few things that still woke him in a cold sweat, the memory of holding the arrow, arm shaking from the strain, and never loosing it. watching the beast vanish into the shadows and evaporate into them.

The beast has to pull back his lips and tastes the smell to get the full of it, to pull William's scent from beneath the false one he wears. His jaws drop open and there is something familiar keeping him there, something haunting and familiar.

When he finally gets a full taste of it, the ears rotate back. I gave you London, the beast thinks. I won't give this to you. Not you or anyone.

William had started killing wolves in London. Outside the city, near it. Vindictive kills trying to make up for the one he'd missed. Pelts piling up as a sick reminder of how different the other had felt, how harsh and sticky, almost sharp, when William had been close enough to

grip it and it had slid away. And he'd let it. It hadn't taken him long after to come to Gévaudan.

The beast tilts its muzzle down and howls - it does not curse or speak it simply brings the sound up from its chest into the rounded cavern of muzzle and projects it forth. It does not raise in pitch, only volume, staying in the lowest register of howl - a warning, a direct threat. The beast can smell the silver of his blade, as sure as it can smell the danger.

When it is finished warning him, it goes from quiet stillness, almost as if the beast were about to subside, to a sudden lunge with open dangerous mouth. The beast on its feet can nearly look William in the eyes - it does not have to reach far to gain his throat.

William ducks. Far enough to avoid the jaws and push his shoulder into the soft underside to tilt it off balance if not cause the beast to fall. It does neither, but it gives him enough time to retrieve an arrow are fire it off. Even close range it does nothing. Snags in the thick fur and is shaken off like water. William scrambles up to stand and loads another. Perhaps if it opens its jaws again he can fire inside, break the delicate skin, choke it.

"I let you live in London," he murmurs quietly, "I won't make the mistake here."

He's certain the beast can understand him, certain those eyes hold more than wolfish instinct. For a moment neither move. And when William looses another arrow – as the beast lunges again – it misses.

No, it thinks, wheeling even as it lands, and it has to keep moving to throw his aim, but it is watching him the whole time. No I let you live.

Neither seems ready to repeat the mistake. The beast shows his teeth, and then the arrow that targets that weakness is caught at the last instant with a turned head and teeth snapping the shaft. It aims low this time, charging full strength with head angled down but the only grip it can get is the thick leather of William's pants and the tanned skin tears like paper in his jaws then catches enough to take Will off his balance and drop him down onto the forest floor.

Then the beast is gone, in a flash of silvered tail and a rustling of leaves, as it ducks down through the undergrowth - not retreating, though it would like William to think it is. The beast knows these woods, owns them. Let William try to best him on his own territory, where everything is working for him.

William's cry echoes loud but short in the forest, still too close to its edge to have the voice carry longer. He watches the beast vanish into the trees, sound gone with it as swiftly as the bulk of it had. William doesn't immediately follow, doesn't allow himself to with a wound so fresh. He unwraps the leather from around his arm, the strap that had been protecting his wrist from the slash of the bowstring when he fired, and ties a quick tight tourniquet around his leg. Only then does he push himself up to move.

The beast is sure footed and fast but always seems to be disappearing just in the corner of the hunter's eye as he moves through the next thick tangle of brush, steps out of the next copse of trees. Deeper into the woods, further in. The beast is a fluid streak of movement, a galloping

grace that blends where it desires but occasionally turns a glowing yellow eye to be sure William has not thought better.

It's a pain William can set aside, but his speed has certainly been hindered. He keeps up, only because the beast tempts him to, turns deliberately, bares its teeth. The third arrow William fires hits home, he's rewarded with a yelp and then silence. He stops, teeth grit, and listens. Their struggle has cleared any creatures from the forest, birdsong is there but muffled, too far from where William is. Everything is too far. He's run into the forest with nothing more than six more arrows and a knife.

William turns, slowly, placing his feet carefully enough to make no sound, and draws another arrow to be ready.

The wounded animal does not turn round on him like any other might, but the evidence of it fades. It goes on silent, ginger paws, but it cannot pull the arrow out of its flank with teeth, nor push it through. The beast's best option is to hide - to leave William alone and lost and to return at his leisure. The silent, tense time stretches on uninterrupted.

Wandering takes William nowhere but deeper into the territory it claims as its own, where the boughs overhead have gone silent, and no other animal dares. It seems a long time to wait to be lulled into security. The trail of dark, hot blood takes him to a stream and vanishes where the beast must have known to swim in the freezing waters, leaving a hot trail of blood and breath behind it.

But there is no sign of it there. A rattle leads him left, the shaking of brush to the right, but if it is the beast, he does not see it again as the day wears on. As the sun begins to set, the snow begins to fall - the last pawprint appears in the freshest of the fall, sunk down to the frozen earth.

Then nothing, nothing at all. William is turning to try and perhaps find his way back to the village - easier if he could see the stars - when the smell of smoke reaches him, the glimpse of a glow through the trees. It is not a wolf he finds but a man, bundled up in furs and with enough dry wood to keep him warm through the night it seemed. He only looks up to see William at the edge of his camp because the wood pops and cracks.

His eyes are dark, not gold, and they show confusion to see another.

William's fingers are numb against the arrow now, set in the same position for the duration of his search, pointed at the ground with fingers barely brushing the feathered end to be ready, and the fire is a welcoming sight, though a surprising one. He ventures closer, relaxing the bowstring and pointing his weapon to the ground further. He doesn't yet let it go.

"A strange place to set up camp," he remarks, noting the lack of weapons near the man, though it is obvious by his appearance what he is; like William, a hunter. He lets his eyes scan the forest just outside the ring of dull warm glow. There has been no sound, no sight of the beast since he'd shot it, but he is too weary to return to the village. His lack of rest is catching up and pulling William's head down between his shoulders, curling them, too, from their stance to a tired slouch. He lets the arrow rest between the fingers holding his bow and rubs his eyes.

"Not so strange," the man answers, and the corner of his mouth turns up. He is in the process of readying dinner by the pot at his feet, the pile of potato peelings next to his leg in the snow. As William approaches, the arrayed line of closed and clean traps make themselves evident in a line beside the lean to that is slowly acquiring snow. "It's in the middle of my trap line. Strange to see a bow hunter out this far."

“I have nothing to offer in return, but may I share your fire for the evening?” William’s voice is quiet, but he allows his body to relax more in the man’s presence. He doesn’t address the other’s remark.

The trapper sets aside his peeler and seems to consider William from his seat - the remains of a deadfall, with oiled canvas slung over to keep him more dry as he sits on it. The fire seems to deepen his features, to let shadow fall heavily over his eyes between the harsh light and the brim of his hat - hardly fashionable. It is an old leather thing, with a thick round brim tacked up on one side in case he should need to draw a bow - if that's the purpose, he is left handed.

"My fire and my supper," he suggests, seeing no pack nor provisions. "You're out far for someone with no pack. Did you come from Tournel or Cenaret?"

With the potato peeled, he slices it neatly with a small knife, squaring it into the pot at his feet - it seems to complete the stew he was working on. When he shifts to place it on the wrought iron tripod over the fire, he does so with a faint stiffness - cold or age.

William blinks, the one point of light in the surrounding dark forest making his vision swim until he shakes his head to clear it. he needs rest. Supper would be welcome, a warm fire to lie near, and an early start to get back to the village or further into the forest for the creature he’d wounded. He makes a faint sound, like a hum, and steps closer, returning his arrow to the quiver at his back, setting the bow to the ground at his feet.

“Gévaudan.” He replies, letting his eyes scan the traps where they lie. There are few animals out this far, this deep, for the place to warrant being the center of a trap line, but William doesn’t question the man’s art. He’s not a trapper. His eyes pause on a loop, an inhuman hooked thing used for trapping wolf cubs. William directs his eyes away from it.

“I didn’t anticipate my journey to take as long as it has.” He replies, “I’m grateful for the supper.”

"The snow is punishment enough for poor planning," the man answers. "An empty belly seems unnecessary."

William watches his companion move, notes the stiffness, the way it seems centred on a point in his lower back or hip, and hindering the movement. He doesn’t comment.

“The beast in these woods doesn’t frighten you?” he asks instead.

With the pot hung to cook, the man pats the deadfall, that William should sit close to the fire, and brings a heavy bearskin out of the lean to in offering. He settles it over William's shoulders, since he is dressed so lightly for the weather.

"It is only a wolf," he answers, and settles back down on the log to look William in the face, studying him properly for the first time. "And I'm devout enough to escape demonic wrath, I suppose. I'm not any good at farming, if I don't do this I'll starve. It's just as dead, isn't it?"

The man yawns, turns the stew once with the heavy metal ladle. "Is that what you're out here for, judgment? There are faster ways to seek it."

Dark eyes watch him, attentive, the posture is relaxed as he stays seated, elbows over thighs, hands hanging between his knees. The man unfolds far taller than he looks seated, and for all the stiff pain with which he moves, there is a grace to him too. Here, folded, it is easier to forget.

William mediates on the fire and feels his lips curl in a smile that is far from friendly. A grimace fuelled by anger and irritation, before turning.

“It is more than a wolf,” he replies, “It does not hunt like one. It’s harsh, it leaves parts of a carcass behind that no such hunter would. It’s clever in its carelessness, taunting. It would not catch easily in wolf traps such as yours.” He gestures to them but doesn’t take his eyes off the trapper, “The cunning this creature possesses, and the cruelty, render it far more human than wolf.”

He adjusts the bearskin against his shoulders, grateful for the weight of it, if not the warmth. Just as in the village, the cold does not bother him.

“Though perhaps I was out here for judgement,” he allows after a pause, listening to the fire crack and pop in front of them, “But not only my own.”

"Wolves are built to eat the weakest members of the herd," the trapper explains, quiet. He does not let his hand fall to his injury. "And humans breed their animals to be weak and complacent. They are made to be eaten - the wolves are simply doing what they should. Vengeance is a uniquely human concept."

If it is the noose of a trap, it has slipped cleanly over William's wrist and then let him withdraw his fingers intact again. The trapper wraps his hands carefully and pushes the pot out on a swing arm so that the stew will stay warm but not scald.

"I only have one bowl," he explains. It's vaguely apologetic. He lets William have the bowl anyway, and the spoon, and serves him first and generously - he must eat from the pot itself, with the aid of the ladle, and he does with no great compunction that it must look ridiculous. He's hungry, as one might well be after a day of movement.

“What’s your name?” William asks finally, feeling his eyelids droop in exhaustion, the smell of food and the warmth lulling him dangerously close to dropping his guard. He continues conversation to keep himself awake.

"It's unusual," the trapper answers, at length. "Hannibal. Roman names were popular in my village when I was a child - the priest would suggest them to new families."

He arches his eyebrows once, c'est la vie, and continues to eat. "And you are?"

“William.” The name is freely given, it doesn’t matter. The stew is hot and rich, the flavor of the meat sharper that what William is used to, and he can’t place it. It tastes like game, boar perhaps. Regardless, he devours his meal, grateful for it. it helps to wake him, to get his senses keener, his eyes blinking sleep from them less. He returns the bowl with an incline of his head and lets himself take in the camp again.

For all its setup, he sees no fruits of Hannibal’s labor, no sign that the traps collected heralded any kills. He hasn’t seen the man before, either, not in Gévaudan. And he’s fairly sure his is the closest village to this part of the forest. Any others, the ones Hannibal had mentioned, would be two days walk at the very least, and the man had neither horse nor sled to bring all his equipment here.

“I suppose trapping becomes far less lucrative in winter.” He says, “Few animals venture out for more than food for themselves. How long have you had camp here?”

"But the winter pelts are thicker," Hannibal agrees – “fewer animals, but the fur is of better quality in the winter. One will take the place of three, in winter coat."

The second question doesn't prompt a pause, Hannibal simply shakes his head in answer. "It's simply a camp. Along the river you'll find several - mine and those of others. We leave wood and a clear space. I have been here only since the evening. In the morning I will roll everything up and move on - but I have left enough wood for the next hunter."

It’s not a panic, but it’s a slow undeniable worry that creeps up William’s spine and settles at the base of his neck. There is nothing outright amiss, but in a way that's what suggests an alarm to him. Hannibal sates himself on stew, and straightens his back in a stretch. He looks sleepy as well. He finds the cover for the pot and sets it on, pulls the heavy iron kettle off the tripod and sets it stiffly in the accumulating snow to cool.

"You're hunting it," Hannibal continues at last, after the fire has filled the silence with its low roar and pop. "What will that pelt fetch, I wonder?"

The tone is curious, not vain. This time Hannibal settles down a little closer, and settles his back against the log instead to stretch his feet toward the fire, his hands tucked under a fur of his own, chin tipped down, and the brim of his hat covering his eyes.

“Peace of mind, perhaps.” William replies quietly, envying the man the comfort of his position. It is late, snow falling quietly but not thickly enough to seek shelter yet.

"It is just a wolf, Monsieur. Or perhaps a whole pack of them, growing smaller every time people strike out in fear."

William doesn’t argue. He’s simply too tired. Perhaps it is a pack, perhaps not. He shifts to mirror the trapper’s position, bearskin on the snow rather than around himself. The fire is close enough but William doubts he’ll sleep restfully for long, regardless.

The silence between them is complete but not uncomfortable. William spends a long time simply watching the man for signs of movement, but it appears that he fell asleep as quickly as William will once he allows himself to. His bow is by his side, the quiver set down on top

and close enough for William to hear if someone were to try and take it away. One knife he keeps in his boot still, the silver one at his belt behind him, covered by the coat he'd thought to bring with him.

He measures the time in blinks that grow steadily slower and more lingering, until William lets his eyes stay closed and sighs, body curled a little too tensely for sleep, but somehow welcomes it regardless. He drifts, and then he falls through dreams of forests and running, a speed no human can attain, before even that dissolves to nothing and his body relaxes in sleep.

Beside him, Hannibal hears the breaths even out, into slow counts of nearly ten. He can feel the man's heat even here, he has come to be used to the confusing tangle of scents and how dulled his nose is in this form, but he can still rest half waking. He still can see the telltale twitch of fingertips and thighs that suggest he is dreaming.

He sets his hat aside, in a slow motion that won't alert his senses. William is a hunter, he knows. He has good instincts. The shift comes easy and slow for Hannibal, the skin feels more like his own than this one. He lengthens and rearranges and it feels less painful than holding the form he likes the least. The trapper's clothes give way, and then he is free of all of humanity and he can see and hear and smell again.

His leg has healed satisfactorily. The spot the arrow had struck is still tender to the touch, but it will take his weight. He moves slowly, slowly, insinuates himself into William's space. He can smell the silver but not see it, and under the fading smell of doe deer (prey, his mind thinks, prey is what he disguised himself as, only right) there is something that pulls at Hannibal's awareness.

It takes him a moment to realize it is the absence of blood. Hannibal had tasted it, he was sure he had, when his teeth had caught skin along with leather pants. His teeth are inches from the exposed back of William's throat when he considers this information, holding his breath so as not to wake the man. Hannibal understands. He could tear William's throat out now, but he stays his bite, paces around instead and settles his massive weight over William's legs to pin him still, puts his paws up on the man's chest and pushes him into the log through his sudden explosion of struggling, and he shows his teeth until the man goes quiet with the realization that he could be dead already.

It's the only cold William feels, when his adrenaline releases into his system and sends his body to move without his volition. He is not used to it enough to just set the feeling aside, it scares him. he panics, crying out and trying to wriggle out from under the dead weight that pins him, fingers catching on the rough fur, lungs struggling to retain air when paws press them empty. When he stops moving his eyes are wide, pupils huge in the dark of the shadow covering him.

Yellow eyes meet William's from a span of inches, and the beast opens its maw but does not growl or bite or rend. It does not tear, though it is clear that it could, at any second.

"I know what you are," it says.

William can feel the blade against his back, feel the shape of it press through the clothing into his skin. he can reach it, the way he is, it would be a simple twist, but he hasn't got his senses about him, not all of them. He knows that as soon as he becomes useless, boring to the beast pinning him, he will be dead. He will not have more than one chance to kill him at such close proximity. He missed it in London, let the beast run, he will not do it again.

"Do you lack the civility to speak to me in your true form?" he asks, breathless but steady. He tries again to dislodge the weight on his legs and finds himself unable. He turns his head to the side when the muzzle gets closer, a low growl vibrating through William's very bones. He's a hunter. He has been one all his life. He knows he is no saint, no hero, but he is flawed as any man. He doubts, however, that his flaws are what is keeping him alive. He stops his struggle and lies pliant.

Hannibal shifts his weight, sinks massive paws heavy into William's thighs and his legs have gone to pins and needles with the interrupted flow of blood. "Civility," it repeats, and there's a harsh sound from it. "How do you know this isn't it?"

This was the truer form of the two, the one he wore easier, the skin that suited what he has become far better than the soft eyed man who'd shared a meal with William. This was the skin the beast wore when he knew who he was. William doesn't answer his question but with another.

"Tell me," he murmurs, "Tell me what I am to you."

"An intruder," the beast answers, and William's pulse is pounding beneath its paws, it can smell him really, finally, under all that evasion. "A liar in disguise. A murderer."

The last is spoken with the beast's teeth practically against William's pulse - the steady, unblinking gaze was hypnotic, and the creature moved closer in fractions so small they were immeasurable, but there is the hot push of breath on William's neck, the flick of tongue as it speaks.

"Just like you." William breathes back, heart hammering, head tilted up to avoid the muzzle that moved to his throat instead. He swallows, wonders if he can reach the knife before those teeth render him unable to breathe, but as with any predator he doesn't close his eyes, doesn't look away from him.

"I'm also the man who let you live once." he adds carefully, "And your debt stays your hand." his teeth, rather, but William doesn't have the mind for humor the way he's lying, his lower body aching from the weight pressing down on him, his chest sure to be bruised from the immense paws that slowly curl inwards to dig claws through his clothes into his skin.

A wet sound of derision paints William's throat in slobber. "I let you live, too." Hannibal could have turned and fought, could have defended his territory - tried to find vengeance for his lost pack and his surrogate sister, but he had stayed himself then. Retreated. The city was holy ground, somehow, for this man. But now he had come out of it and into Hannibal's territory.

"What do you want then?" William asks, the strain of lost air sounding in his voice.

The question is a good one. The beast doesn't seem to know - he wants William to leave, he wants to leave William clutching his neck and gasping as life's blood poured out of him into the snow. He wants never to see him again, he wants to see him always. Complex thoughts are harder for the beast.

"You could be mine," it says simply, and the pressure of its paws eases for a second, as it shifts one back leg to rest on the ground instead, to take more of its weight than the other three, though the instant William moves in a way it does not like, the weight will be back. "We're made for packs, you and I."

William blinks, the release of pressure heralding a sharp intake of breath and a slow exhale. He doesn't make the mistake of reaching for his knife now. He can't read the expressions on the beast's face, only in its eyes, and even they yield little more than hunger. For company, for companionship, for William's blood to seep from between its teeth and down its throat. It's a hunger William is unsure the beast understands itself.

He draws his lips back in barely a shadow of the power and anger the beast presents, but in that, at least, they are the same. He wants to lash out, to fight back and scream until it understands, until it knows that nothing it does will make William stay with it, nothing will stay his hand this time. They are nothing alike. William kills for survival. Whether it be hunting food, or defending himself, he never kills without a reason. Not since he culled most of the wolves near London before moving on, not for a long, long time.

"I chose a different path to you, I will not veer off it." he replies quietly, eyes still on the yellow, unblinking orbs. He ignores the part of himself that yearns for the company, the 'pack' that's being offered. He's closed it down long ago.

'We're made for packs, you and I'

"You and I are very different."

The answer wakes an old ache that the creature does not understand. An anger comes with it. Was it simply to prove the difference between them that there had been all this bloodshed? The beast laughs - it's a growling, snarling sound that's full of pain and anger.

"If we were alike, how many more would be alive?" it asks, but it's rhetoric. It doesn't matter.

The beast licks William's pulse once, softly, like a promise. The tongue is rough, the breath is surprisingly far from foul, and then it pads off him.

"You'd have done better to tip your arrows in silver, hunter. Use the knife." it says, tail swishing once, decisive. If he wouldn't go, and he wouldn't stay, this would only end one of two ways. It crouches, and waits - waits for William to get his fight together.

William's grimace turns to disgusted but he doesn't move until the beast steps back. Even then he doesn't move beyond raising himself to rest on his elbows, drawing his legs to himself to feel the blood return to them in a painful rush. He doesn't reach for the knife yet, not about to give away his one and only chance of getting out of this alive. Or, at least, of taking the beast with him if he dies.

He unwinds the leather tourniquet from his leg and swipes at the blood there. The skin beneath is pink from healing but otherwise unmarred. He pulls his other knife from his boot and turns it in his hand to point downwards, down his arm, resting against his wrist for the moment, cold metal against hammering pulse.

"Why do you kill?" he asks, legs still too weak to hold him, but his position no longer as vulnerable. He shifts back, to sit more comfortably against the log and feels the silver knife press against his spine in reassurance. It's there, for when he needs it. For when he has no choice but to reach for it. The same feeling that had stayed his hand in London is threatening to overwhelm him and it takes a lot for William to sit still.

"They do not discriminate," Hannibal answers, and his voice sounds tired. "Why does it matter? They would feel good if they killed me - as you will, if you can. Why should I not kill them, and feel good?"

There is a sound like a sigh. He can smell that this knife is not the silver one. Would he really draw it out? Risk his life that way? "This is mine. The woods. As they kill wolves that wander to where they should not be - so far as man considers, anyway, I kill."

He is tired of questions. Tired of the ache when he thinks of pack , when he thinks of youth. Only blood hot in his mouth will make it cease, only a conflict will tell him the future. There is no sense in debating. William does not go for the weapon that is deadly - he wants to draw this out. Hannibal would rather it be over.

Perhaps he would have rather it have been over all those years ago, when he dropped snarling from the rooftops onto a scared hunter and then left him untouched save the bruises inherent in so large and heavy a creature landing on him, to aim arrows at his back as he ran, dipping his paws in the muddy filth that lined the streets.

At least here it is soft, dead pine under the snow, the scents are real and vital and alive. Here they know him as an individual. He has shown them terror. "Why do you kill?"

William considers the answer and finds himself mute when asked the same. He has taken life, has watched it leave bodies, watched the eyes slowly turn cold and unseeing. He has made it his work to, to clear London of wolves, to make a name for himself that drew him to France. After this, if he lives, it will draw him further. He briefly considers that his entire life has been a suicide mission, an idea he told himself was real but has never been proven, by himself or another.

"I kill to set myself free." he finally says, "Because if I can kill enough of them. Wolves. Men. Beasts of any kind that terrorize and hurt and frighten the innocent, if I kill them, then I can vindicate myself."

And it sounds like such a pathetic reason, such a childish thing, but William had never asked for this, had never wanted to be something so destructive, something so feared. And he's suppressed it. From childhood he had learned to suppress the urge to change, the urge to run and kill and submerge himself into a world so far from the one he wanted to be in. And now he was here. With someone - something - like him, that had fought his entire life to be what William had fought not to be. A direct opposite. A mirror.

It's frightening, this feeling, and William feels the tugging urge to step away, to step closer, fighting the same twist of emotions Hannibal had been fighting before. It's only fair to offer trade. To someone - something - so powerful, so deadly, so buried in his beliefs as William was in his own. He adjusts his grip on the knife and stands up, weapon, for now, at his side.

"You want me yours?" he confirms, voice just as low, just as quiet and tinged in sadness as the beast's was. "Drag me there."

The beast's crouched limbs seem to coil beneath it, powerful muscles gathering themselves for a forward spring. William couldn't understand that the only freedom was in embrace, that he could not win back what he had been, but he had to move forward. It seemed he wanted to be driven, though perhaps it is a ploy to keep Hannibal from going for the kill - only to wound.

While William fought without silver, it would work.

Springing forward, Hannibal's advantage is clear - size, speed, strength. It does not spring forward but back, out of the circle of light the low-burning fire leaves. Its eyes are stronger at night, and he takes it into the shadows seamlessly, brothers embracing their own.

William blinks, cursing quietly when the beast chooses its advantage and vanishes. His fingers flex in want of the weapon that can kill it, but stays his hand for the moment, just waiting. Besides the fire, now burning now when it hasn't been tended to, there is no sound. Snow falls silent and William doesn't move, holds his breath, turning just his head, shifting just his eyes to see.

The only warning that William has of the coming leap is the sudden shine of yellow eyes throwing green fire where the light catches them, and then the beast is almost on him again, jaws open.

It's reflexive, the way William strikes out, and he misses anything significant, skimming the blade almost delicately over the rough fur on the beast's side. And then they struggle, caught in a flurry of limbs and anger, one fighting with strength, the other using all his skill to divert that strength away, turn it against the monster using it. It's clumsy and cold, and in the struggle the little knife William had for defense gets tossed aside, outside the firelight where he can't reach it.

It's a moment, just one, where William considers surrendering, considers lying back, presenting his throat and come what may. One moment in which his fingers slip, slick with blood and the hot saliva of the beast whose jaws he's holding open, keeping them from closing and tearing him apart, slip enough for the teeth to slice a deep gauge from elbow to wrist, enough for the taste of blood to be overwhelming for them both - William twisting his face away from the spray and the beast pausing to savor it - just enough for William to reach back, with the hand that still works, and pull out the knife that matters.

And in a desperate, uncoordinated swing, bring it across the creature's shoulder.

The first cut was nothing, a little pain, the spatter of hot blood and the jar of the little knife against his ribs. Hannibal feels it, but does not matter. It will not linger. But this cut - this

parts the Beast's hide and skin as if it weren't there, and the noise that comes from it is half scream and pained yelp - it has never felt anything like this before.

The wound yawns open wide over the beast's shoulder, from the base of his neck and down onto its chest, steaming faintly - there is a scent like burning hair, like charring skin, and the beast whines again at the sensation, unable to stop the agonized noise from tearing free.

It shows no signs of healing.

The beast turns his howl into a snarl, and turns again - now it's for keeps. He disappears out of the light again, but this time the charge is slower, the affected limb almost drags, but Hannibal has determination enough to make up for it, and his jaws close on the arm holding the knife and bear down, just as desperate.

Strength seems to have ebbed from the beast, and though the teeth cut, the limb does not snap. It leaves them in a clumsy interlock, with William clawing at his eyes, prying at his jaws to try and work his hand loose, and one yellow eye rolls up in the instant that Will's hand seizes a triangular ear and pulls, as if to ask if all of this were really necessary, if all of this was going to get either of them where they wanted, and then he surges sideways and whips the powerful muscles of his neck and shoulders to steal Will's balance and toss him to the ground, and this time his claws scratch when he gets one forelimb on him, the other uncooperative and stiff. He is reliant on his weight now, and not his strength, to keep William pinned. He holds him still, tongue lolling with the effort, and for a moment their eyes meet before the action resumes. William lifts the knife, Hannibal opens his jaws and lunges for the exposed neck.

But even as the blade sinks home, the mouth is soft on William's pulse, the brush of tongue, only the barest closing of teeth - submit, the gesture offers, submit, be mine. But whether the trap never snaps shut because the silver pulses poison through his veins in slowing beats, or because this time it's Hannibal who stays his strike is uncertain.

Everything hurts. The weight, the ability to breathe, William’s useless arm that somehow - somehow - is still attached, though he can see the bone through the slashes there, feel his body tremble from the loss of blood and surge of adrenaline. And with the pain comes the heat, the unbearable heat of the blood that's not his own mingling down William's flushed skin, filling his wounds and overflowing them.

But it's the pressure, the complete lack of it against his throat that William has bared now, neck arched and eyes closed, it's that the makes him whimper, that makes the blade he's holding in two hands - one on the handle, one pressing palm-to-blade to drive it sharp against the beast's neck - feel heavier than it should. Than it is.

'You would feel good if you killed me. Why should I not kill and feel good?'

William drops the blade, feels it land heavy against his collarbone, and curls his weak fingers in the thick fur, eyes still closed, neck still bared for whatever retribution awaits him, and never comes. He drops his arms, one so damaged he'll not lift it again, the other numb from the fingers down to the elbow, the feeling folding over him in quick hammers of his heart, over and over. He'd cut his fingers pressing the blade so deep.

This time the Beast is silent as it suffers, though the smell of smoking and burning suggests it must be doing so horribly. It had lost, it was the weaker one. The weight subsides from William's chest, and it staggers a step, two, before it falls flat. The breaths it takes are slow, hitching, deep. He is stretched out alongside William like a dog might lie, blood pooling warm beneath his fur.

"Are you free?" The beast asks, and laboriously it rolls more onto its feet, stretches its neck long to reach, and tastes the silver tainted blood from William's cut fingers, and then whines again when it burns him going down. It is a supplicant gesture, a motion of healing and soothing.

Was it so bad, what they were? Was it truly any worse than being human? Hannibal's eyes close before he stops the soothing laps of tongue, almost apologetic, and then the motion slows, breath ceases. In death, the beast becomes the man it once was, the thick coat of fur subsides, and leaves a still form curled in the falling snow, losing heat rapidly. There will be no trophy from this kill, no pelt of brown-silver fur to lay down victorious at Camille's feet, just the knowledge that the villagers will have only normal wolves to kill, they will live on safe and secure.

They will forget terror.

And it's that that shocks William the most, the sight of all his work rendered on such a delicate, fragile canvas. And on the backdrop of skin, now, William can see the damage he'd caused, the skin he'd torn with frantic nails, the depth of the dagger's bite. He doesn't speak, he can't, but the wail that rises in his throat is as much a howl as the beast's had been; animalistic, instinct, mourning.

For a long time he doesn't move, exhausted and bleeding, resting side by side with the corpse that turns steadily more pale, eyes dead but dark without a hint of gold. William closes his eyes, swallows, knows if he changes now he will heal much faster, but denies himself the luxury. He sleeps.

By morning, he no longer sees bone through the gashes, but they seep blood into the makeshift tourniquet regardless. William leaves Hannibal where he lies, another victim of the Beast of Gévaudan, and takes up his bow to return to the village. By nightfall he stumbles to the farm, collapsing in silence by the barn, unable to make it farther. He regains consciousness enough to know Camille is cleaning the wounds and wrapping them, he doesn't answer her questions, she asks very few. When she's finished bandaging him she presses her lips gently to his in thanks. He loses consciousness till morning.

By then, the silver has spread, filling the veins on his arms with viscous black, fingers unable to bend, the pain unbearable. He wonders if this is freedom. If his fight had been a just one, a worthy cause. His hand doesn't heal. His heart beats the poison to every nerve in his body but he does not die. He'd won his freedom.

He wraps the wound carefully, saddles his horse, and leaves that night for Spain.

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